

It all began that day when my buddies Vincent Gahan and Radu Hladek were putting on a Geekster concert at Caltech. As with any typical Geekster concert, I was there, not only to provide technical support, but also to join them on the stage for part of their set. I was not officially a Geekster, but I had my own musical project with my harp or keyboard, which I will work on sporadically. This particular performance was for the annual celebration for the day the Rift got closed by the Night-Falcon, who also turned out to be Dr. Joanne de Salvo, one of my research collaborators. While I was wiring the keyboards up to the speakers, Vincent was fidgeting with the silver pendant he found in Florida. It was a beautiful pendant with what looked like an engraving of a falcon superimposed on a recurve bow. "Everything ok?" I called out, although I knew Vincent and Radu were both comfortable performing on the stage and had been touring for about three years and on off as academics allowed them.

"Yeah, Tara," called out Vincent. "But for some reason I felt the pendant, that one I found at that last concert in Florida, was vibrating and felt really cold all of a sudden." Vincent was an athletic young man of medium height with jet-black hair that was slicked back and a tanned, handsome face with a slightly golden tinge and dark, intense almond-shaped eyes, revealing his Chinese and mixed European origins. He wore a pair of black jeans and a tight white button-up shirt with a black leather jacket with silver highlights that formed the shape of far-Eastern styled dragon. On the lobe of his left ear was a simple crystal stud earring and on his ring finger of his right hand, he had a silver ring that was shaped in the likeness of a howling wolf's head. "And the ring also feels funny," he added.

Radu was a tall, lanky young man with spiked, wiry blonde hair with brown roots that stood up by itself. He was extremely pale with thick gold-rimmed glasses, expressive blue eyes, sharp features, and a distinct cleft in his chin that his goatee only barely covered. Unlike his fellow Geekster, he wore tight white pants with pink stars on it and a baby blue and pale yellow tie-dye shirt. On the lobe of both of his ears were small silver earrings that seemed to form abstract, almost rune-like shapes. "This might sound weird, but remember those earrings I got from that vendor in Florida? They did the same thing!" he said. He had a very heavy accent that was effectively a linear combination of Czech and Romanian, but to the untrained ear, he just sounded like another Russian guy.

For the rest of that evening, we were wrapped up in the Geekster concert. I focused mostly on making sure none of the equipment fell on their heads or

exploded, but I made my showing for their hit song, *Returning to You*, which was a song that Vincent and I had written together when he first came up with the idea of a band when we were still in the Cal State LA early entrance program. I played the keyboard, while Vincent took lead vocals and Radu rapped in a mixture of different languages.

I walk down the thorny trail,  
Perhaps to tell a tale  
Of adventure and derring-do  
Or to sing a song of my longing for you.

Alone I trek, save for my songs  
For you, to whom my heart belongs.  
Tell me, if I ever hurt you,  
Know that my love is forever true.

Radu rapped something in Czech that I couldn't quite understand as a counter-point to both his and my keyboards. Normally his singing voice was clear, almost boyish tenor voice that had a sweetness that hardly anyone could match, but when he rapped, his voice became a slightly menacing murmur.

Vincent and I then sang out the chorus with Vincent's resonant and beautiful baritone filling the outdoor amphitheater and my own soprano voice ringing through the instruments. Both of our voices formed an almost haunting effect as we sang with our hearts. I could see it in the audience's eyes – the young women, mostly teenagers really, were trembling at Vincent's hauntingly beautiful voice and several of the men were also shaken by my voice.

Oh the winter may pass and the spring may die  
The summer may fade and the years may fly  
But I'll return to you, my love  
By the sun above  
And the shining stars, I promise you

After running through the chorus twice, Vincent resumed his solo, causing several of the teenaged girls to scream and tremble in excitement. I had to admit, if there were such things as angels, they would envy his singing voice.

I may be trapped in hell below,  
Or wounded by a mortal blow  
But nothing can silence this tune  
Even if we depart all too soon.

You alone are my guiding light  
Through the dark and stormy night,  
My hope that shines across the sea  
Only your love can set me free

At the end of the set, which included a combination of covers of their favorite songs by a few old bands including O-Zone, Moenia, Depeche Mode, and Erasure and their own hits, such as *Through the Veil*, *The Magic Table*, *Why?*, and *Eyes of a Falcon*, we did our usual thing of meeting with the audience and letting ourselves recover from nearly two hours of song and dance. Well, they did at least, but tonight, I had an extended part in the concert and I was fairly tired too. It was after the concert that the real adventure began...

While Vincent and Radu were signing autographs or taking pictures with anxious teenage female fans, I was trying to hide from the rest of the audience for some reason. I had walked from the amphitheater to Throop Gardens in the middle of the Caltech campus, where many people sought a moment of peace and quiet away from the libraries. After hiding amongst the rocks and plants, I overheard two very loud voices nearby, one a very deep female voice and one that made me think of a gigantic parrot of some sort if parrots could talk.

"Killer, Clawstaff is fuckin' going to give us frontier justice up our asses if he knew that we tampered with his shit," said the female voice. "Or worse yet, he'll make us fuckin' sit through more of his shitty lectures followed by a lab demonstration with us as the test subjects." I looked up to see an extremely tall muscular female, almost as tall as Radu, but probably outweighing him by at least thirty pounds, who I knew was about six foot four and about a hundred and twenty pounds. She was wearing leather pants, a linen shirt, and a leather vest that made me think of a cowboy. On her back was a huge claymore sword and a longbow that was easily bigger than me and her face reminded me of one of Tolkien's elves, except she had a long scar running across her cheek. Her sea-grey eyes then scanned the scene and they glowed ever so slightly with a reddish light.

The second voice, which grated on my poor eardrums, began to squawk and whine. "Naw, Tindariel, we'll be ok. Clawstaff's a big softie, he'll just make us do homework. Or he'll make YOU do homework. I'm tenured history faculty, remember?" Then I looked to see what could sound so horrible and I almost fainted. It was a giant parakeet about six feet tall with a rusty dented pot for a hat and a huge battle-axe slung to its back. Its deep turquoise (on the body), yellow (on the face), and dirty white (wings and tail) feathers were somewhat ruffled and covered in a fine dust that made me sneeze repeatedly. I quickly decided that I didn't want to be enemies with it after I saw the razor-sharp claws on its scaly feet and the even scarier razor-sharp beak that could probably cut me in half without any effort.

I called out to the two strangers. "Hey! What's going on? Need help finding something?"

The woman, Tindariel, looked down and said, "We're out on a mission to find the remaining shards of Telcontar and the ring of Memnon, passed from Eärendil."

The giant parrot, whose name apparently was Killer squawked in interruption. "Hey, we weren't supposed to tell her that! Clawstaff doesn't want the worlds to know that he's trying to solve that mystery about the Tindarn-Niniel forest and find the one who's gonna use Telcontar to do some ass-kicking!"

I almost laughed at the two. "Well, don't worry, I'm not going to do anything because I don't know what you guys are talking about. If you want, I can take you somewhere to do a Google search on Telcontar."

Both of them looked completely puzzled and shrugged their shoulders. Tindariel said, "Google. I remember one of Anya's friends had me play with it on one of those funny boxes, computer or something like that. She and those other Terrian students when we were on that vacation. By the way, what's your name shorty?"

"Tarathorn Sutankankul, but everyone calls me Tara," I replied.

"I'm Alhanthra Tindariel Il-Kanan Toel Ul Thorondarien. But just call me Tindariel, the rest is just shit expected from Eldharin nobles," said Tindariel, then she pointed to Killer. "And that is..."

"I am Killer Parakeet the Great, Hero of the Banishings!" it squawked loudly. At that point, I decided to refer to this monster as a male, judging from his behavior. I sneezed a few more times – the dust on his feathers was really getting to me!

I motioned to the two of them, then said, "Come on, follow me." Was

this another bad dream after studying a bit too hard?

While I led these two strange entities around the Caltech campus, I started to wonder if Killer was drawing attention to himself just by being an overgrown parakeet. People did glare at us, but if there's anything about Caltech, it's the fact that students there do such weird things that anything weird just seemed "normal". Gradually, I led them towards the amphitheater where Vincent and Radu were finishing up their little meet-and-greet session with the audience.

Suddenly, Tindariel spied something and shouted, "The ring!" With that, she charged head-long into Vincent, who was drinking a glass of water.

"Where?" shrieked Killer, looking around everywhere with those beady black eyes of his.

"What the hell?" asked Vincent, puzzled at the six foot two woman who suddenly grabbed him by the lapels of his shirt.

"I'll ask the questions or I might just administer some frontier justice. How the hell did you get that ring?" She pointed at the ring that was on Vincent's hand, that wolf ring that made me a bit uncomfortable. "And that shard of Telcontar!" she demanded. Then she saw Radu, who was trying to pry her loose from his best friend. "And you have yet more shards of Telcontar!" she roared.

While Killer decided to busy himself with chewing on some chairs and Radu's guitar after a futile search for the ring, I ran in to try and break up what looked like a bad brawl. "What the hell is this thing about Telcontar and the ring?" I screamed, wondering what was going to go wrong next. Bruised and terrified, Radu and Vincent stepped back from Tindariel, ready to bolt, while Tindariel's sea-grey eyes flared with a slightly reddish-gold light.

Tindariel glared at Radu and Vincent, then said, "I am to bring back all and any shards of Telcontar and any knowledge of the ring. Which means you humans are going to have to come with me. You can either come with me willingly, or I might have to administer some frontier justice." She clenched her fists and flexed, showing off her powerfully well-developed muscles, something I thought Tolkien's elves could never develop. Then she turned to Killer, who had just finished reducing several chairs and the guitar into kindling and was now working on some of the stage. "Hey, bug-trap! Come over here, I found the fuckin' ring and the shards of Telcontar!"

Radu and Vincent looked at each other, then at me and finally at Tindariel. "What choice do we have?" asked Radu hopelessly. Killer hopped

over, bobbing his head up and down with the remnants of Vincent's guitar in his beak and gnawing on it eagerly.

Following Killer was a large group of police, aided by frightened mobs from both the audience and passers-by who reported "a large man in a bad parakeet costume who was destroying things". Tindariel instantly drew her mighty longbow, nocked an arrow to it, and fired off several arrows at the police. Her dirty-white and turquoise-fletched arrows (were they from Killer?) all struck police, some even passing through them and striking the person behind them. Then police drew their own guns and shouted, "Freeze or we'll shoot!"

"Frontier justice!" she screamed eagerly, firing away.

"Stop!" I cried to Tindariel, scared she might get us all killed. Vincent and I then tried to at least knock her over to keep her from shooting any more arrows and cursing. Radu also joined us, hoping we wouldn't get killed for her idiocy. Then it happened. Killer made some strange noises and pulled something out of his pouch and threw it. Blue smoke filled the air and I pretty much passed out.

The last thing I heard after inhaling the smoke, which reminded me of hydrogen disulfide mixed with unbathed parakeet and dirty gym socks, was "You are under arrest for disturbing the peace!"

I woke up to find myself in a soft, comfortable bed in an airy room decorated by flowering plants of all sorts. "Where am I?" I asked.

"You are in Parakeet Hall at the University," said a musical woman's voice. The voice belonged to an ebony-skinned woman with long silver hair, slightly slanted almond-shaped eyes, and a red robe that only accentuated her shapeliness. In one hand was a staff topped with a beautifully carved likeness of a unicorn.

A second woman, also ebony-skinned with silver hair, but wearing outdoor clothing and carrying a pair of long, slender swords on her hip, stepped in. "You three were lucky when those two idiots messed up. I keep telling mother and step-father to not send ogres to do a Dhaerow's job, but they always insist on sending those idiots."

"What the hell? Where's Vincent and Radu?" I demanded, nervous. "Are they all right?"

"They're fine, although I think they're not quite as tough as you. Baelnorn is tending to them, the taller one, I believe Radu, took an injury somewhere neither of us wanted to handle," laughed the robed woman. "And by

the way, I am Taniltharya N'Shad-Daermon, but you may call me Tanil."

I wasn't sure if I wanted to laugh or groan at that, knowing that Radu seemed to have a curse that any injuries directed at him almost always went between his legs. "I'm Tarathorn Sutankankul, but everyone just calls me Tara." I extended my tiny hand to Tanil, who took my hand in her delicate, fine-boned hand, which felt very cold to the touch.

"And I am Ilithara N'Shad-Daermon, Tanil's daughter," said the other woman, also shaking my hand. Like her mother's hand, it was very cold to the touch. Was there something about Dhaerow? "And you may or may not have met my long-estranged half-sister, Iliiryana, who journeyed into your world not long ago in search of the wielder of Telcontar." At that point, I was about to explode at all these mentions of Telcontar. Then I thought back to what I learned in that history class about the Rift period. Soronthrel the Night-Falcon, or as I knew her, Dr. Joanne de Salvo, had wielded a recurve bow by that name. Didn't the bow get destroyed when she faced Senator Mathers?

While I was pondering over Telcontar and what had just happened, Vincent and Radu both hobbled in with an elderly man in a blood-red robe with a clawed staff. The elderly man, unlike the others, looked like a normal, albeit decrepit and somewhat underweight human man with thinning white hair and a long beard. "They're all right now, they're all very resilient," creaked the elderly man. "And you, young one, I am Baelnorn Clawstaff, Keeper of the University." For some reason, I felt extremely nervous around him and my stomach began to turn. Was he just a creepy old man or was there something really wrong? "My pardons to all three of you for Killer and Tindariel's behaviors. But I do have much to ask of you three..."

I instantly felt that sinking in my stomach and I'm pretty sure Vincent and Radu felt the same. It was just like one of those Dungeons and Dragons games where the players got called together by some high-level character to do some dirty work for them. Was I dreaming? "Take whatever you want and let us go! We're just Caltech graduate students dabbling in music as the Geeksters!" insisted Radu.

Vincent added, "Besides a few pieces of metal, what else could you possibly want of us?" He undid the silver necklace around his neck and removed the ring from his finger and offered it to Tanil. Radu did likewise and offered his earrings. As soon as the silver objects contacted Tanil's skin, vapors escaped and where the metal contacted her, there were scorch marks.

Clawstaff stepped towards Tanil and wheezed, "No! She cannot touch

these, nor can my daughter Ilithara.”

”Vampire,” whispered Radu to both me and Vincent.

Ilithara’s pointed ears perked up slightly. ”Dhaerow. Full-blooded Dhaerow can’t touch *tikal* unless they have been blessed by the Eternal Huntress. Even mortals can scarcely touch it, but you seem to be unbothered by it.”

”Shit,” grumbled Vincent. ”I guess our Cal State LA show will have to be put off?” he added, trying to ease the tension in the atmosphere.

”This is no laughing matter,” creaked Clawstaff, thumping his staff on the ground to emphasize his point. Then with a gesture of his withered, claw-like hand, I found myself unable to move at all and everything felt cold. ”Maybe this will be your incentive to do this deed. Tarathorn’s freedom if you take our offer.” My feet felt like they were rooted to the ground and my legs became completely stiff.

”No!” shouted Radu, charging at Clawstaff defiantly, only to have Ilithara lunge at him and knock him off balance, forcing him to land on his butt. When he tried to get up, she sent a violet bolt of light at him, stunning him and keeping him seated on the ground.

Nervous and furious at the same time, Vincent’s normally golden-tinged tanned face turned scarlet and without a second thought, tried to strike at Ilithara with his clenched fists. Ilithara merely smiled and grabbed him, throwing him, while Tanil raised her staff and sent a bolt of energy that pinned him to the wall. ”Damn, what the hell do you want?” sighed Vincent, resignedly after struggling to get up and watching us do the same.

Wheezing and spluttering the whole time, Clawstaff said, ”We want you to return the shards of Telcontar to its rightful wielder. No more, no less. Until Telcontar is rebuilt and given to its rightful wielder, the Eternal Huntress will always seek to destroy all that Ildathra and Olodrin, the gods of art and academic knowledge, respectfully, have wrought over the years.”

”How do we know you’re not trying to get us killed?” demanded Vincent. I wanted to say something but I felt the distinct sensation of my mouth being zipped shut. All the while, Tanil smirked at me.

She then looked at the three of us. ”You must trust us. Even as Dhaerow, the most mistrusted of the fey creatures, we have at least a limited sense of honor,” she started.

”And this is how you treat us?” screamed Vincent, his voice cracking slightly in fear. ”Forcing us into this without our permission, black-mailing us! What proof do you have?”

Tindariel suddenly burst into the room and roared, ”Enough with the

bullshit, you two damn mages and you silly little pokey! Let me tell you the real scoop on this. No more flowery stuff. There's a fuckin' new prophecy that says that when the bow Telcontar is restored and given to its rightful wielder, there will be a new age of peace between the inhabitants of Tindarn-Niniel and Farmsdale. Just because ya'll can't fuckin' touch those metal shards because you're either a fuckin' lich or a fuckin' Dhaerow or some other fuckin' weird thing..." Her normally pale face turned scarlet in anger, something which I actually could fully understand after what this trio had done to us.

"Alhantira Il-Kanan, have you no respect..." began Taniltharya, glaring at her.

"Instead of all this flowery bullshit, let me just take care of it," Tindariel practically exploded, ignoring the others. Clawstaff merely sighed and took a seat, looking more like a decrepit old man whose children had forsaken him in his time of need than the lich that Tindariel had accused him of being. "I'll take the kids with me to Tindarn-Niniel and do what we have to do. Didn't Iliiriyana fuckin' tell you about that vision she had?"

Iliithara nodded, then replied, "You should know better, Tindariel. Iliiriyana refuses to talk to any of us ever since that... incident thirty years ago... with Anya and your... er... Cylithera. But do tell what you know." Then she turned to the three of us and pleaded, "If you don't trust us, please at least trust Tindariel!"

Radu's and Vincent's eyes darted this way and that, first the three who had imprisoned us, then to each other, then to Tindariel. My instincts told me that Tindariel was trustworthy, at least judging from her transparent, straight-forward nature. Granted, she seemed to be a real idiot, but at least she was genuine without any of the scary fronts that the other three put on. Taniltharya finally spoke in the tense near-silence, with the only sounds coming from Clawstaff wheezing. "For over three thousand years I have awaited for this... the day when the Eternal Huntress and Keepers of Knowledge and Art can finally stop fighting," grunted the decrepit old wizard.

Looking intently at Tindariel and the two boys with her intense, red-violet eyes, Taniltharya said, "I will let you take charge this time, though my heart has many misgivings of allowing you to do this. But we will keep Tarathorn here to ensure that Vincent and Radu do not attempt to betray you."

"Us?! Betray you?!" screamed Vincent, quite unlike his usual cool-tempered

self. "What reason do you have to expect us to do that? We are Caltech graduate students under the Honor Code!"

"Vincent, calm down," whispered Radu. "Maybe the cowgirl has a case."

"We are not your pawns to be used and exploited!" exploded Vincent, almost sounding like Tindariel, minus the excess swearing.

"Look, I have as much of a fuckin' stake as the rest of ya'll. Let me get the fuckin' deed and you can go back to your fuckin' spider webs and toad eyes and any other shit you fuck with," spat Tindariel, grabbing me like a sack of potatoes. "I'm taking all three of them to Tindarn-Niniel! Especially the little one here." I let out a small squeak at being lifted so roughly.

Taniltharya gestured to Tindariel and said, "No. We will still keep Tarathorn here. You can take Vincent and Radu, but the little one stays here."

I protested, "Why? Am I not as much a part of the group with the shards of Telcontar?"

"But it is also spoken among the Wise that one of the Alfar must not enter Tindarn-Niniel," said Tanil, motioning for Tindariel to put me back down. "Leave Tarathorn here with us," she commanded.